

Leviticus (February 18)

Reading Leviticus

He had pastured and watered the young bull all its days. Now the bull stood calmly before him as he solemnly placed his hands on its head. He nimbly swung a blade through the animal's throat, severing the main artery. Blood spurted and then drained rapidly into the bowls brought by the priests, who carried the blood to the altar while the worshiper continued to butcher and skin the animal. God would be honored by the fat, the kidneys, and the liver lobe that the priests would burn. The worshiper's family would feast together on the meat the Lord had provided.

Leviticus opens with earthy, life-and-death detail about the sacrifices Israel was to offer at the tabernacle they had just built in the wilderness. Their cattle, which had traveled with them out of Egypt and southward to Sinai, would not only feed their eager bellies but also touch their hearts as living illustrations of God's gracious provision for them. By these sacrifices, he would provide atonement for sin and food for life and fellowship in the congregation of Israel.

Themes

The key theme of Leviticus is holiness: the holiness of God and man. In Leviticus, spiritual holiness is symbolized by physical perfection. Therefore, the book demands perfect animals for its many sacrifices and requires priests without deformity. The person with visible skin disease must be banished from the camp, the place of God's special presence, just as Adam and Eve were banished from the Garden of Eden. Such a person can return to the camp (and therefore to God's presence) when he is pronounced whole again by the examining priests. Before he can reenter the camp, however, he has to offer the prescribed, perfect sacrifices (symbolizing the perfect, whole sacrifice of Christ).

After the covenant at Sinai, Israel was constituted as God's kingdom, and, as her King, the Lord established his administration over all of Israel's life. Her religious, communal, and personal life was so regulated as to establish her as God's holy people and to instruct her in holiness. Special attention was given to Israel's religious ritual. The sacrifices were to be offered at an approved sanctuary, which would symbolize both God's holiness and his compassion. They were to be controlled by the priests, who by care and instruction would preserve them in purity and carefully teach their meaning to the people. Each particular sacrifice was to have meaning for the people of Israel but would also have spiritual and symbolic importance.

Some suppose that these Old Testament sacrifices were remains of old agricultural offerings – a human desire to offer part of one's possessions as a love gift to the deity. But the Old Testament sacrifices were specifically prescribed by God and received their meaning from the Lord's covenant relationship with Israel – whatever their superficial resemblance to pagan sacrifices. They indeed include the idea of a gift, but this is accompanied by such other values as dedication, communion, propitiation (appeasing God's judicial wrath against sin), and restitution. The various offerings have different functions, the primary ones being atonement and worship.

Blessings for Readers

As you study the book of Leviticus, reflect on the detail and deep care with which God teaches the people about faithful, orderly worship. Though worship is chiefly a matter of faith and sincere repentance, God's people must not regard the outward expressions of worship as mere formalism; our outward actions reveal our hearts. Genuine confession of faith manifests itself in thought, word, and deed.

Note especially the four greatest themes of Leviticus: cleansing, atonement, rest, and redemption. These themes foreshadow Jesus' sacrifice on the cross, his peace, and the freedom he grants us in the gospel. Seeing these broad themes allows one to understand that Leviticus is truly about the chief article of the Christian faith: justification through Christ's blood.